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Fitness, Nerves, the Degenerate Body and Identity:
Radical Reality and Modernity in
Max Nordau's Aesthetics and Fiction

Nicholas Saul

This paper argues that Max Nordau's monistic Darwinism and concept of the subject as embodied place him in the tradition of radical realism. In this context, Nordau's literary works have hitherto been regarded as heteronomous productions, mere allegories of his Darwinian cultural criticism and so without intrinsic value. Here, however, it is argued that his aesthetic writing, which consistently thematizes life in the body, in some degree represents a counter-discourse to his critical work. First, the novella 'Pas de chance' (1879) is seen to reflect in literature on the relative cognitive performance of literature and scientific discourse, and ultimately to celebrate literature's autonomous cognitive power. Second, contrary to the anti-Naturalistic, anti-neurasthenic prescriptive and proscriptive aesthetic of *Entartung* (1892-1893), both this novella and "Mahârôg" (1906) are shown to foreground as a kind of Wilhelminian Gothic (often extreme) physical and social ugliness. Thus paradoxically they both legitimate its representation and their characters' attempts to come to terms with their negative embodiment. Nordau's literary work thus includes what his theory demands to exclude and so transgresses the scientific and medicalized normativity there propounded.

Max Nordau, born Max Simon Südfeld in the Jewish community of Pest, has an undesirable popular reputation and, perhaps on that account, has generally been little read or studied. On the one hand he is known as the author of the study *Entartung* (1892-1893),¹ an impressive, acute, in part amusing but also depressing, abusive and deliberately divisive diagnosis of everything that was wrong with modern art, which is condemned in biologicistic terms unacceptable today as degenerate. Worse, and despite Nordau's unsecret Jewishness, this notorious analysis paradoxically became linked with the dismal *Entartete Kunst* travelling exhibition of 1933, in which National Socialist cultural bosses publicly denounced what they considered to be 'unhealthy' art.² On the other hand Nordau, the quondam renegade

¹ Max Nordau, *Entartung*, 2 vols (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1892-1893).

² See Thomas Anz, "'Gesund' und 'krank.' Kriterien der Kritik im Kampf gegen die literarische Moderne um 1900," in *Ethische contra ästhetische Legitimation von Literatur*, ed. by Walter Haug and Wilfried Barner (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), pp. 240-250; T. Anz, *Gesund oder krank? Medizin, Moral und Ästhetik in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989), pp. 33-52; Jens-Malte Fischer, "Dekadenz und Entartung –

Jew, was of course converted to Zionism by Theodor Herzl, and is today revered as one of the founding fathers of the state of Israel. It is hard to know what to make of such apparent contradictions, so that the obvious move, if one seeks the truth about Nordau, is to return to his texts. In the last fifteen years that is precisely what scholars have done, and there has been a mini-renaissance (or nascence) of Nordau studies associated initially with the names Schulte, Söder and Stanislawski³ and most recently Zudrell, Person and Kottow.⁴ These, to bring us up to date, have done away with the myths. Nordau is for example not a racist, or at least only a racist insofar as almost every Western intellectual around 1900 factually and unreflectingly subscribed to the commonplace, then-authoritative post-Darwinian anthropology of opposed natural and cultural peoples, at either end of a hierarchy of sophistication. Nor was Nordau an ideological Zionist. Rather, he seems to have been persuaded into that cause on ethical and cosmopolitan grounds. Indeed, he was no kind of nationalist, believing national consciousness to be a mere construct, and remained all his life a vehement critic of monarchism and militarism. But this is not our focus here. That is Darwinism and literature. Nordau was a qualified and practising medical doctor, and as such a convinced biological and cultural Darwinist of the first wave and strictest observance.⁵

It is his unapologetic Darwinian anthropology which links him with the cognitive interest of this volume, Howard N. Tuttle's concept of monistic radical reality, its tradition in nineteenth-century positivistic science (and

Max Nordau als Kulturkritiker des Fin de Siècle," in *Fin de Siècle. Zu Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*, ed. by Roger Bauer and Eckhard Heftrich (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1997), pp.93-111.

³ See on this Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle. Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), esp. pp. xv-xvi, 26-27, 74-97; also Hans-Peter Söder, "Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism," in *GSR*, 14 (1991), 473-487; and Christoph Schulte, *Psychopathologie des Fin de Siècle. Der Kulturkritiker, Arzt und Zionist Max Nordau* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 1997).

⁴ Petra Zudrell, *Der Kulturkritiker und Schriftsteller Max Nordau. Zwischen Zionismus, Deutschland und Judentum* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003); Jutta Person, *Der pathographische Blick. Physiognomik, Atavismustheorien und Kulturkritik 1870-1930* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005); Andrea Kottow, *Der kranke Mann. Medizin und Geschlecht in der Literatur um 1900* (Frankfurt a.M., New York: Campus, 2006), pp.127-173.

⁵ See Hedvig Ujvári, "Entartung und konventionelle Lügen. Zum Zivilisationsbegriff von Max Nordau," in *Trans. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 14 (February 2003) on Nordau's early *Pester Lloyd* essays, 1873-1874: <http://www.inst.at/trans/14Nr/ujvari14.htm#t100>. Accessed 3 April 2013.

earlier epistemes), and their common relation to literary production.⁶ Now Darwin's is in intention nothing but a conventionally value-free and falsifiable scientific theory, admittedly of almost unchallenged authority up to the present day. Hence Darwin himself painstakingly avoided deriving any moral, philosophical or theological meanings from his theory. It is thus at best only partially co-extensive with any variety of "Darwinism," the philosophical or other interpretation of what Darwin's original theory might be taken to mean.⁷ As for Germany, German "Darwinism" indeed really means German "Darwinisms," of which tradition for our purpose there can probably be said to exist in the nineteenth century two major strands. Both are Spencerian in their orientation, conceiving of evolution as a teleological or progressive process of development analogous to the growth of a tree, and viewing the evolution of life as a positive movement from less to more complex species, less to more sophisticated and valuable organisation. Karl Eibl sees the dominant strand of German Darwinism after Ludwig Büchner as being idealistically filtered, open to devotional and aesthetic neo-Romantic discourses.⁸ Philip Ajouri suggested recently that there was however, notably in figures like Vischer and Keller (and I would add Raabe and Jensen), a more materialist strand, more sceptical of religion and progress, and more akin to the hard-bitten English mainstream tradition.⁹ Nordau, I would suggest, belongs in the latter tradition of appropriated Darwinism. He believes that human nature is exhaustively explicable in physical and physiological terms derived from the newly dominant discourse

⁶ Howard N. Tuttle, *Human Life as Radical Reality. An Idea Developed from the Conceptions of Dilthey, Heidegger and Ortega y Gasset* (New York and Washington: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁷ See on this discrepancy Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); "Herbert Spencers Idee der Evolution und ihre Rezeption," in *Die Rezeption von Evolutionstheorien im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Eva-Marie Engels (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995) pp.309-25.

⁸ Karl Eibl, "Darwin, Haeckel, Nietzsche: Der idealistisch gefilterte Darwin in der deutschen Dichtung und Poetologie des 19. Jahrhunderts. Mit einer Hypothese zum biologischen Ursprung der Kunst," in *Fritz Mauthner: Sprache, Literatur, Kritik*, ed. by Helmut Henne and Christine Kaiser (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000) pp.87-108.

⁹ Philip Ajouri, *Erzählen nach Darwin. Die Krise der Teleologie im literarischen Realismus: Friedrich Theodor Vischer und Gottfried Keller* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007); also Nicholas Saul, "Raabes Geschichte(n): Realismus, Erzählen, Historie, Prähistorie," in *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Raabe-Gesellschaft* (2009), 22-39; and N. Saul, "'Once in Human Nature, a Thing Cannot be Driven Out': Evolutionary Aesthetics in Wilhelm Jensen's *The Legacy of Blood* (1869). An Early Response to Darwin," in *The Evolution of Literature. Legacies of Darwin in European Cultures*, ed. by Nicholas Saul and Simon J. James (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 239-253.

of Darwinian positivistic natural science. The content of consciousness is wholly causally determined by material factors: the body, inheritance, environment (and of course chance). In this sense, then, Nordau's psychophysical Darwinist anthropology can be captured by Tuttle's broadly-framed notion of radical reality, which defines human life and the body as the same, and sees human life as circumscribed by the holistic and monistic experience of an embodied subject (Tuttle, p. 79) – an experience which precludes any aprioristic mode of knowledge. Nordau's critical and aesthetic works are in this sense his pioneering explorations of the consequences of new, monistic Darwinian rules of the game of life for modern humanity. His project, however, has had even worse consequences for his reputation in one area – aesthetics – than some of the things previously outlined. For like his near-contemporary, Wilhelm Bölsche,¹⁰ Nordau rejects the chief aesthetic axiom of the grand idealist tradition – aesthetic autonomy – and welcomes positivistic natural science and its philosophical derivatives as the dominant providers of truth.¹¹ Thus aesthetic discourse, rather than being creative of meaning, can, so it seems, only be a parasite on or a servant of the prior truth of science.

All that suggests two chief cognitive interests of this essay. First, I shall ask how far, as some critics of Nordau's almost unstudied yet bestselling literary works have suggested,¹² those works really can be regarded as mere allegories of his philosophical and scientific position. For if that were so, his literary works would indeed be bereft of autonomous dignity and any "Leistung der Form,"¹³ that is, the semantic or cognitive difference conferred by aesthetic shaping. Indeed, they could hardly be classified as works of art at all. Second, having rejected that criticism, I shall explore the significance in those works of the most radical reality, the body, for his Darwinist anthropology. To these ends I will investigate two literary texts from either end of Nordau's career, both novellas: "Pas de chance!" from Nordau's first collection *Seifenblasen* (1879) and "Mahâ-Rôg" (1906) from the

¹⁰ See Wilhelm Bölsche, *Die naturwissenschaftlichen Grundlagen der Poesie. Prolegomena zu einer realistischen Ästhetik. Mit zeitgenössischen Rezensionen und einer Bibliographie der Schriften Wilhelm Bölsches*, ed. by Johannes J. Braakenburg (Munich: dtv, 1976), pp.1-65 (p.25).

¹¹ See Max Nordau, "Mene, Tekel, Upharsin," in M.Nordau, *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* (Leipzig: Schlicke, 1883), pp.1-35 (pp.30-32); also "Evolutionistische Ästhetik," in M.Nordau, *Paradoxe* (Leipzig: Elsaesser, 1885), pp.280-310 (pp.291, 309).

¹² See Stanislawski, pp.23, 30-31, Zudrell, pp.15, 273-275, and Melanie A. Murphy, *Max Nordau's Fin-de-Siècle Romance of Race* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p.130.

¹³ The term belongs to Peter Pütz, who applies it to drama in his *Die Leistung der Form. Lessings Dramen* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1986).

collection of the same name.¹⁴ The first, published before virtually all of Nordau's theoretical or publicistic writings, is in my view not at all a soap bubble, more a programmatic exploration of the relative truth content of literary and scientific (medical) discourse. The second is an example of Nordau's characteristic deployment of the theme of the meaning of our bodies in the post-Darwinian world for the way we live our lives. I also include references to *Entartung* and some shorter essays of Nordau to contextualise the points.

Those who have looked at *Seifenblasen*¹⁵ tend to take the title at its word – that is, without registering the foregrounded hint of defensive irony by a new author longing despite his fears for recognition. I think this is emblematic of the way all Nordau's literary work is read. Yes, this volume contains several potboilers and space fillers in imitation of other writers, for example, Karl May. But “Pas de chance!” does not belong in this category, in particular its concluding tale. However, it does foreground many of Nordau's lifelong thematic obsessions. The central protagonist and first-person narrator is a Parisian doctor who possesses a more than passing acquaintance with the dissection theatre. Then there are the obsessive themes: the body, the intellectual pursuit of the “Mysterium des Lebens” (“mystery of life”, *Seifenblasen*, p. 84), its corollaries death and love, and their corollary, woman. The narrative is situated in the dissection theatre of the Hôtel Dieu in May 1877, tellingly in the depths of the ancient hospital beside the Seine and below the water-level, lit dimly by a few tiny high, porthole-like windows which are regularly submerged under the murky water. This macabre environment is nineteenth-century positivistic science made literary symbol: decor-free, dominated by dissection tables, devoted wholly to the pursuit of the mystery of life through the analysis of its lifeless remains. The subterranean, or submarine, dissection theatre, then, figures the deep structures of the psychophysis.

Doctors habitually drop in to see whether any interesting corpses have turned up, and this is the occasion of the narrative. Our doctor happens upon one as yet undissected, fresh cadaver, which grips his whole attention: a strikingly beautiful, evidently proletarian, young woman with no outward, visible mark of the cause of death. Her skin is flawless and peachy, her features regular, she is indeed a classical beauty (*Seifenblasen*, p. 87). Her face

¹⁴ *Seifenblasen. Federzeichnungen und Geschichten* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1879), pp.82-92; *Mahá-Rôg und andere Novellen* (Berlin: Alfred Scholl, 1906), pp.3-88. Nordau's collection is not to be confused with the later collection of the same name by a rather different kind of Darwinian writer, Kurd Laßwitz, *Seifenblasen. Moderne Märchen* (Hamburg: Voss, 1890).

¹⁵ See Zudrell, pp.262-263; Murphy, pp. 49-50.

bears only a diminished trace of the agony of death, her still open eyes reveal nothing of what she has seen in the past or beyond the grave (p. 86). Of course we recognise here something like the primal scene of Gabriel von Max's painting *Der Anatom* (1869), and this tale is surely in part an ekphrasis of that image.¹⁶ But by contrast to the Max painting, the body does exhibit one curious sign for a nineteenth-century woman: a tattoo.¹⁷ Her name, evidently, "Marie Balok," a year, "1876," and the further words, "Pas de chance!" (p. 87).

So how and why did she die? Faced with this riddle, the dissection room becomes the site of what Jürgen Link identified as the major function of aesthetic discourse: its ability to cite other discourses and reflect on them at a metalevel.¹⁸ Hence we find a kind of cognitive competition in truth-finding occurring between the spontaneous narrative production of our writing doctor, and the immediately subsequent actual autopsy of the professional pathologists, both forensic in intention: between aesthetic and natural-scientific discourses, then. The result, significantly, is a draw. The narrator finds himself extrapolating metonymically from the text on Marie's body *qua* "Inhaltsverzeichnis des unglückseligen Menschenlebens" ("contents list of an unhappy human life", p. 87) a retrospective biographical dream (pp. 87-88). She is, he imagines, a typical Parisian, first-generation immigrant *grisette*, familiar from many French Naturalist experimental novels, like *Nana* or *Lulu* no better than she should be and using what weapons nature has given her to fight in the metropolitan struggle for existence (p. 88), encountering poverty, poorly-paid work seamstressing or some such, violent lovers in Montmartre, alcohol, and so forth, and above all a yearning for something undefined but better (p. 89).

The crux of the tale is reached on a picnic excursion to St Germain, the lung of Paris (p. 90), when Marie experiences a sudden impulse to be tattooed. Now if we follow Lombroso, tattooing in the nineteenth century is the prerogative of sailors, male proletarians, and criminals – all of them, to him, degenerates. But the impulse comes to Marie under the decentring

¹⁶ Compare Zudrell, pp. 262-262 (who is content with a bare, functionally allegorical ekphrastic reading); also Elisabeth Bronfen, *Nur über ihre Leiche. Tod, Weiblichkeit und Ästhetik* (Munich: Kunstmann, 1994), p.89.

¹⁷ See the commentary on tattoos as proper to degenerates and primitives by Nordau's guru, Cesare Lombroso, *Der Verbrecher (homo delinquens) in anthropologischer, ärztlicher und juristischer Beziehung*, 3 vols (Hamburg: Verlagsanstalt/Königl. Buchhandlung, 1894) [1st edn. 1876], I, pp.253-269.

¹⁸ Jürgen Link, "Literaturanalyse als Interdiskursanalyse. Am Beispiel des Ursprungs literarischer Symbolik in der Kollektivsymbolik," in *Diskurstheorien und Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. by Jürgen Fohrmann and Harro Müller (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988), pp.284-307.

influence of alcohol, when she experiences in a micro-epiphany the primal desire for self-understanding and self-expression. She herself composes this cryptic arabesque of her identity, which is crudely tattooed by her lover onto her right upper arm. That this primitive cryptogram is the essence of her being is indicated by the narrator's observation that tiny drops of blood ooze from every puncture, to merge with the indigo forming the very text (p. 91). Her identity is thus merged with her body, her body sublated through her lifeblood into the words and numbers. No luck, obviously, in attaining her heart's desire, is the motto, the Alpha and Omega of her existence, written on her body for those with eyes to see. This, he concludes, was not only her motto but also a prophecy.

Now this immanent reflection in creative writing of creative writing is not presented as a certain historical truth. But it is confirmed by the autopsy results (p. 92). Marie, it turns out, had a weak heart valve, and she died of a heart attack in a moment of passionate excitement. The exact science of dissection, then, like the reconstruction of the imagination, discloses a fundamental heart problem, so that the one discourse is demonstrated by the tale to complement the other. In Dilthey's contemporary language the aesthetic experience of a "Geisteswissenschaft" (i.e., a matter of empathetic understanding) complements the empirical explanation of a "Naturwissenschaft" (i.e., a matter of logical explanation).¹⁹ There are, then, for Nordau on this construction of the tale not one but two routes of the mind into the mystery of life (and death), each of equal dignity and with its own characteristic cognitive performance: art and science. But the ability to say this, the "Leistung der Form," ("the achievement of literary form") is the unique prerogative of literary discourse.

In this apology of aesthetic autonomy, Nordau seems to re-affirm Max's notorious affirmation of patriarchal gender discourse as disclosed by Bronfen. In Gabriel von Max's painting the male gaze of the anatomist upon the beautiful cadaver is suggested to be transmediated into patriarchal scientific discourse on the body. In Nordau's story the disempowered and intoxicated woman is in some sense at least the author of discourse on her identity, and the lover merely her amenuensis. Then, however, the narrating doctor overwrites it with his version of the truth. There is also an irony here in this would-be irenic reconciliation of the two cultures. Nordau, a lifelong venerator of Goethe, is perhaps unaware of the rupture with the classical aesthetic tradition which his literary thought-experiment to reconcile

¹⁹ Compare Safia Azzouni on Laßwitz and the two cultures read through Dilthey: S.A., Azzouni, Safia: "How Wilhelm Dilthey Influenced Popular Science Writing: Kurd Laßwitz's *Homchen. Ein Tiermärchen aus der Kreide*," in *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen*, ed. by U. Feest, *Archimedes*, 21 (2010), 61-79.

imaginative synthesis and anatomical dissection entails.²⁰ He seems oblivious of Goethe's extremely negative view of the cognitive achievement of the dissection theatre (indeed any analysis of the living) in seeking human truth.²¹

That said, we have at least established that there is more to Nordau's writing than has hitherto been recognised. Aesthetic discourse does, despite Nordau's views expressed elsewhere, possess some autonomy, even if it does not challenge the master discourse of science, and is still legitimated by it.

The mature Nordau moved on to establish himself as the cultural policeman of the fin de siècle, continuing to write fiction but seemingly unable to resist offering ever fiercer publicistic attacks on any contrary tendencies. Thus he famously earned Karl Kraus's disapproval for aesthetically urinating on almost every feature he encounters in the literary landscape.²² This critical strategy has psychophysical roots in Nordau's rigorous insistence on reducing cultural history to the principles of Darwinian biological and social evolution. *Entartung* medicalizes and pathologizes the entire cultural domain, arguing that there are actual psychophysical causes of all negatively regarded cultural phenomena, such as Naturalism, Impressionism, Wagner, mysticism, and so forth (*Entartung*, p. viii). The external causes Nordau seems mainly to locate in the modern way of life in the big city (*Conventionelle Lügen*, p. 17-18), which, apart from restricting access to natural requirements such as exercise and fresh air, subjects individuals to a massive excess of stimulating information (*Entartung*, pp. 71-73), and also exposes them to poisons such as alcohol, tobacco, and other narcotics (*Entartung*, pp. 63-65). The external causes manifest themselves however also internally in the psychophysis as stigmatic maladjustments or deformations of the nervous system (*Entartung*, p. 32), whereby our nerves are either excessively receptive or productive in

²⁰ Goethe is of course the model of 'healthy' literature in *Entartung*. See *Entartung*, I, p.26., II, p.462.

²¹ The paradigmata of this attitude are Goethe's well-known attack on Newton's light-splitting *experimentum crucis* and his perhaps lesser-known advocacy of the use of models of human limbs in preference to dissection practice for medical students in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. by Hendrik Birus, Dieter Borchmeyer et al, 40 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag,), 1. Abteilung, vol. 10: *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, ed. by Gerhard Neumann and Hans-Georg Dewitz, pp.602-610. On this theme Jürgen Barkhoff, "Goethes Ehrfurchtsgebärden in den *Wanderjahren*," in *Anthropologie und Literatur um 1800*, ed. by J. B. and Eda Sagarra (Munich: iudicium, 1992), pp.161-186 (165-166).

²² Karl Kraus, "Max Nordau," in *Die Fackel*, No. 200, VII. Jahr, 3 April 1906.

transmitting sense information for processing in the brain. This in turn results in distortion of the way neural pathways are formed and linked by association and habituation in order adequately to model self and world in the brain. The resultant severe perceptual distortions of self and world ensure that all adaptive behaviour through the foundational activities of attention, judgement and will is misemphasized and misplaced. Hence, we might see here a tendency to lassitude and pessimism or to mysticism, thanks to the failure to establish normal patterns of causal inference.²³ These literally, psychophysically degenerate, world-views are then compulsively expressed by artists in the form of Impressionism (*Entartung*, pp. 51-52 pp. 88-89), Wagnerianism, etc. All modern art seeks thus by definition merely to excite our hungry or satiated nerves in untoward ways (*Entartung*, p. 21). Worst: the stigmata or symptoms of this inner, rather than outward degeneration (*Entartung*, p. 34). This is where Nordau thinks to add to Lombroso's theory: they are first acquired and then passed on in Lamarckian fashion to the next generation en masse (*Entartung*, p. 74).²⁴

Above all, intervention in media is significant, since for Nordau all communication functions by suggestion, so that what matters in this culture of weak-willed and neurasthenic mass city-dwellers is to generate the strongest possible suggestions in the receptive psyches of the mass. In communicative acts, just as in hypnotic suggestion, the recipient, so Nordau argues, is habituated to reproduce exactly what the transmitter sends. The transmitter sends an exact reproduction of his mental state encoded in natural or conventional signs, in which new sensual data experienced are interpreted by being matched with memory data of analogous states already established through association and habit. This judgement is then passed on through the medial connection, just as yawning in one subject encourages yawning in third parties, or as in Darwin's notion that the formation of an expression by one person encourages the inner formation of a concomitant emotion in another.²⁵ In each case the communication stimulates a sense-impression and an inner, nervous response by association which precisely reproduces the sender's state of mind in the receiver, even down to the molecular level.²⁶ The role of the will is crucial in this culture of

²³ See *Entartung*, esp. pp.97-110.

²⁴ On this see Person, pp.125-142. Nordau rejects Lombroso's view of the potential genius of "degenerate" artists (*Entartung*, p.45).

²⁵ See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. by Francis Darwin (London: Murray, 1904) [1st edn. 1872], pp.25-82.

²⁶ See Max Nordau, "Suggestion," in Nordau, *Paradoxe*, pp.222-242, esp. pp.224-230; also *Entartung*, p.61.

neurasthenia and pessimism.²⁷ The stronger the mental activity and in particular the stronger the will in the recipient, the greater the resistance to this suggestive mode of communication (*Paradoxe*, pp. 231-32). Conversely, the weaker the will, the lower the resistance. Only the genius is proof against such effects. The genius, in fact, as possessor of the strongest mind and intellect positively forms the consciousness of the mass in this way, and is the motor of cultural evolution (*Paradoxe*, pp. 236-37).

And so Nordau condemns himself to his lonely fate, a creative lifetime of forcefully aggressive diagnostic polemics. Fascinatingly, given the medical analogy which is the *dispositif* of his life, Nordau seems to offer little actual therapy. Healthy, rather than sick books should be published and publicized, although this sounds more like prevention than cure. Otherwise, he recommends setting up ethical societies and suchlike. In any case the degenerate will die out by definition thanks to their lack of adaptive qualities (*Paradoxe*, p. 270). And indeed it is hard to see how the psychophysical damage from which the degenerates suffer could be repaired. But that said, if we know that Nordau continued apace to write critical polemics against the sickness of the age, what becomes of his literature? Surely he should avoid producing yet another “Buch [...] vom Kranken” (“book [...] of a sick man”) and offer another unfashionable and rare yet precious “Buch vom gesunden Menschen” (“book of a healthy person”) (*Paradoxe*, p. 272)?

Turning now to “Mahâ-Rôg” (1906) and Nordau’s later writings, we discover however that he does not follow his own precept. Here one might have thought that as one who attacked as degenerate the Naturalist foregrounding of pessimism, determinism, the squalid and the ugly, equally as one who derived the experience of aesthetic beauty like Darwin and Spencer from the display entailed in sexual selection, Nordau would attempt suggestively and with maximum willpower to propagate some positive images and norms.²⁸ Not a bit of it. At the level of both content and form the bad and the ugly are not merely excluded but positively included, indeed sometimes they predominate in a kind of (if not Naturalist) then at least late Wilhelmine social Gothic. Typical of this Gothicization, and despite his move to internalize the physiognomic symptoms of degeneration by comparison with Lombroso, is Nordau’s continued fascination with squalid and ugly physicality of all kinds. There are in his tales some enthusiastic

²⁷ On the collective phenomenon of nervousity and the move to the will as therapy see Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich: Propyläen, 2000) [1st edn. 1998], esp. pp.385-485.

²⁸ See Nordau, “Evolutionistische Ästhetik,” in Nordau, *Paradoxe*, pp.290-291.

allusions to and descriptions of post mortems, of course.²⁹ But I am thinking here particularly of descriptions of faces, which almost always are ugly faces juxtaposed to telling effect with beauty. In Nordau's second story collection, *Seelenanalysen* (1892) the tale "Panna" recalls for example the willed contrast of Marie Balok's classical beauty and crude tattoo in *Seifenblasen*. Here, the beautiful, if slightly low-browed Panna marries Pista out of compensatory guilt. Pista was formerly a handsome man. However Panna, in a moment of fury prompted her inherited choleric disposition, has gravely disfigured him by smashing half a brick in his face. One eye is put out, the nose crushed, the upper lip split, left scarred and partly hairless, and several front teeth are missing (*Seelenanalysen*, pp. 63-64). Another example is offered by "Wie Frauen lieben"³⁰ in the form of the painstakingly captured ekphrasis of the 1848 revolutionary Baudin's memorial in Montmartre. Here, Baudin's quotidien features are made noble and transfigured into sublimity, so Nordau's narrator seems to think, by the rendition of the large bullet hole in his forehead from which blood and brain-tissue are spilling (*Seelenanalysen*, pp. 220-221), frozen by the artist for the spectator's and reader's eternal edification. Or, finally, there is the carefully-described, grotesquely lopsided disposition of Geheimrat Behr's face in "Auf Abbruch" from the collection *Mahâ-Rôg*³¹ after his stroke (*Mahâ-Rôg*, pp. 266-267). Nordau is otherwise keen to show how faces decay over time.³² But it is the story "Mahâ-Rôg" which takes the palm here.

For this Hindu phrase, as the narrator tells us, means the great sickness: leprosy, known since 1873 to be caused by bacterial infection, but then still beyond cure or even palliative care. In this tale, set in contemporary colonial India, three generations of Indian women in the same family, all (needless to say) spectacularly beautiful, are threatened by the bacillus, which of course excludes them both from life in general and from the generation of life which is their biological destiny. Here the eldest, Rani, nobly chooses the living death (*Mahâ-Rôg*, pp. 42, 50) of the colony within the colony, the leper colony, in order to minimize the risk of contagion for her young daughter, the extremely beautiful, almost white (!) Udschli, who grows up, for a time, until her impending marriage to the handsome Dasa, in ignorance of her mother's fate and the absent but ever-present danger of her own latent infection. Again, Nordau does not shirk description of the horrors leprosy

²⁹ See "Ein Sommernachtstraum" in *Seelenanalysen* (Berlin: Verein der Bücherfreunde, 1892), pp. 1-29 (p.14); and especially "Panna," in *Seelenanalysen*, pp.63-170 (pp.111-112).

³⁰ *Seelenanalysen*, pp.213-253.

³¹ *Mahâ-Rôg*, pp.217-273.

³² See "Die Kunst zu altern," in *Seelenanalysen*, pp.171-212.

inflicts on a woman's face (*Mahá-Rôg*, pp. 17, 21, 39), even if he restricts the detail to the revealed face of Rani's companion, and leaves us to imagine what lies behind Rani's veil. And when he is not emphasising the death in life that is the leper's fate, he compares their status to that of animals (p. 21). Thus it is no surprise when Udschli, mindful of the danger to her own equally beautiful (and white; pp. 2, 28, 56-57, 60, 70) daughter Tschandni, mindful that even the living death of the colony is no necessary protection for others, and—almost equally important—unable to accept the leper colony as her own fate (p. 42), rejects this solution. When the illness, following a long false dawn, at last breaks out, she learns from her Indian doctor (as ever in Nordau, a *raisonneur* figure) of an alternative, mystical cure. If she will bury herself alive, her sacrifice will purify her daughter; a life freely offered to death buys a life (p. 43). Just as the terrible symptoms begin to appear she takes this horror upon herself (p. 68). And indeed Tschandni *is* saved from the disease, perhaps thanks to the sacrifice, perhaps because she was never infected.

Here, however, comes a surprising twist. Tschandni is of course crushed with gratitude that her life, and above all her beauty, have been saved, and venerates her mother. But she does not follow the path to marriage and to life which her redeemed beauty would seem to pre-ordain. Rather, she chooses to live in seclusion at the temple, becomes a scholar and eventually trains as a Vedic doctor. All these are no doubt intended to signify her choice of a different mode of thanksgiving and an unheard-of—non-Darwinian—autonomy and sovereignty over life. And yet her beauty, saved at such a price, eventually causes her death. She turns out to be a kind of *femme fatale* for the local Rajahs. One forces her hand in marriage, his brother fights over her, so that at last Tschandni, having escaped poisoning by jealous first wives, herself commits suicide with mandrake root. In a dreamlike confrontation with her mother, she reproaches her for saving her beauty, which in truth was her and her mother's curse (p. 88).

The meaning of the twist seems clear. Beauty may be an evolutionary adaptation and aesthetic beauty may derive from that. But the function of beauty in the cultural domain, as alpha males compete to pass on their hereditary material, is deeply ambiguous, certainly for a woman who, as is the case with Tschandni (like a more fortunate version of Marie), wants to write her own destiny. Indeed, the most powerful and perhaps intentionally significant scene in this polemic *against* the cultural use of aesthetic beauty is in conventional terms its most horrific and unbeautiful, when Udschli, having learnt of her fate but still living in the world, visits her mother Rani in the leper colony, the domain of the excluded, and at last, rediscovering

their common humanity, includes this horrifying ruin of a woman in the human gesture of the embrace:

In diesem Augenblick hatte sich Udschli der ganzen Länge nach auf das schmale harte Lager geworfen, das arme Menschengetrümmer in ihre Arme genommen und an sich gezogen und ihr, am ganzen Leibe bebend, ins Ohr gerufen: 'Dein Kind, deine Udschli' [...] die Kranke [...] überließ sich mit einer Wonne, die das Zittern ihres Unterkiefers und das Zucken ihrer weißen Lippen verrieten, der unbekannten Empfindung des Gehätscheltwerdens und sie suchte mit ihren jämmerlichen Armstummeln in schwachen, unsicheren Streichelbewegungen Udschli's Körper zu betasten. So ruhten Mutter und Tochter Brust an Brust und wurden nach lebelanger Trennung wieder eins. (*Mahā-Rôg*, pp. 51-52)

(At that moment Udschli had thrown herself upon the narrow hard bed, drawn up and taken into her arms the poor ruin of a human being, and, trembling in her whole body, called into her ear: 'Your child, your Udschli' [...] in an ecstasy betrayed by the quaking of her lower jaw and twitching of her white lips the sick woman [...] abandoned herself to the unknown experience of being caressed; with the pitiful stumps of her arms she attempted to caress Udschli's body in feeble and uncertain strokings. Thus mother and daughter rested in each other's bosom and became one again after a lifetime of separation.)

Not perhaps what one might have expected from the apostle of Goethean classicism, the ostensible enemy of sick art and of Naturalism. It is just this moment of the representative inclusion of the excluded, it seems to me, which suggests that Nordau's later literary works in many ways offer a counter-discourse to the aesthetic normativity so ruthlessly propagated in his cultural criticism.³³ Emerging as they do from the non-idealistic strand of German Darwin reception, they propagate a hard doctrine of existential ateleological choice, a doctrine of affirmed authenticity, a tough love of acceptance of the radical reality of our given or imposed physical shape and state. In propagating fitness of an unexpected, sometimes counter-selective variety, they expressly confront the nerves of the degenerate reader and argue a moral choice *for* the apparently unfitted. In this they both undermine conventional gender and aesthetic normativity and hesitate to denounce, qualities which are all too lacking in the critical works. These cognitive

³³ See the programmatic essay of Caroline Pross, in which she both reconstructs the emphatically foregrounded presentation of the deviant-degenerate-apathetic Eynhardt in *Die Krankheit des Jahrhunderts* through Agamben's inclusive-exclusive biopolitical concept of banishment and notes how the text simultaneously subverts that categorisation: "Die Kunst der Unterscheidung. Zur Darstellung der Anormalität in der Erzählliteratur des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Bann der Gewalt. Studien zur Literatur und Wissensgeschichte*, ed. by Maximilian Bergengruen, Roland Borgards (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), pp. 361-386 (esp. pp.375-386).

qualities come demonstrably from their aesthetic form. Nordau's literary *œuvre* functions, then, to this extent as an indicator of the indispensable nature of the *Geisteswissenschaften* ("humanistic studies") as our moral guide through radical reality in the age of science. Is aesthetic experience, then, as a consummate trait of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, a translation of *Lebenskraft* into a new medium?